In Celebration of Ed Schein—His Lasting Importance to the Field

Edgar H. Schein: The Spirit of Inquiry
by Gerhard Fatzer, John Van Maanen, Daniel C. Schmid, Wolfgang G. Weber (Eds.)
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Originating over a hundred years ago, the festschrift is a tradition of European university lineage to honor a professor of great standing, a special book of essays by colleagues and students in tribute to their dear teacher and mentor for a lifetime of contribution. Edgar H. Schein: The Spirit of Inquiry is just such a book. Edited by Gerhard Fatzer of the Trias Institute, MIT Sloan School’s John Van Maanen, Daniel C. Schmid from HWZ University, and Wolfgang G. Weber of Innsbruck University, the book was presented to Ed on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday. The volume was conceived by Fatzer and Schmid, “put together as a labor of love” (p. 9).

Before getting started, in this written review it’s “Ed,” as it is in the book, not Schein, Dr. Schein, Professor Schein. This, as we learn, is how he had things at the Sloan School’s Organization Studies Group (OSG), which he led for so many years, informal, familiar, accessible, open. Qualities of the group and the man.

Each of the editors has his own chapter looking at Ed’s legacy and impact intellectually and professionally for the field, but also Ed’s personal impact on themselves and so many in a deeply human way. That his impact was such is entirely fitting since both the business and human sides of enterprise have been twin themes that have shot throughout Ed’s work, from the 1950s to this day.

The editors are joined by others—Lotte Bailyn, Peter Senge, and Otto Scharmer of MIT; Stephen Barley, Gibb Dyer, Deborah Dougherty, Nitin Nohria, Jane Salk, who trained there; and others now and originally outside the United States, Gideon Kunda and Sabina Schoefer. Too, Ed’s own son, Peter, discusses his father’s legacy in the context of their collaboration today in the Humble Leadership series and also his dad’s growing up years in Europe in a concentrated multi-cultural context.

Tracing Ed’s Roots

In a separate chapter, Daniel Schmid, a historian of the period, traces Ed’s background to his parents’ roots in little known Trstena, Czechoslovakia, part of Austria Hungary at the time and before Hitler came to power; then on to Zurich, Switzerland in 1925 where Ed was born three years later and where his father Marcel completed his PhD in physics; then in 1934, with mounting pressure on Czech citizens to leave Zurich, a move to Odessa, Russia. Finally, with Stalin and other challenges of Soviet life on the rise, after three years, the family again emigrated, making a lasting home in Chicago in 1938, where Marcel taught at the University of Chicago. Ed was ten years old then.

All of this, as Schmid notes, was formative in Ed’s later professional interests in culture, identity, and socialization. It also shaped his broad cosmopolitan perspective, the value of learning and the intellectual life, and familiarity with the university as an institutional milieu for one’s career.

1. All page number in-text citations are from (Fatzer, G. et al., 2019), unless otherwise noted.
2. The end of the book features a listing of all of Ed’s publications, with his favorites in bold.
John Van Maanen comments how “Ed sometimes speaks of having a ‘refugee mentality,’ a feeling of being on the margins or at the periphery of things” (p. 23). This, critical for the detachment needed in the work Ed later seminally described as “process consultation.” Ed, in his auto-biographical journey published in 2016, worked on piecing together and filling in some gaps of his family’s odyssey. First from his daughter Louisa’s exploration, and then along with Schmid, Ed discovered how Trstena’s Jewish population was later decimated in the Holocaust, the whole social history of the period pervading the life of his family, his early years and development. He also learned of the centrality of friends and real human connections to assist his family in its movement.

Intellectual Father and Mentor to Many

The lineage of Ed, from his father Marcel to his son Peter and daughter Louisa, suggests Ed’s role too as an intellectual father to many. Gibb Dyer and Stephen Barley remark how seeing Ed even conjured up an image of Freud, with his beard, stature and gravitas. Yet, as Ed’s students and colleagues make clear, while in awe of his deep intellect, standards, and seeming ease that he drew upon a breadth of perspectives, Ed did not especially cut an image of a stern, father figure. Rather, its opposite: one of encouraging others to grow and reach out in their own directions, letting things go where they go, without being directive. Jane Salk notes a nuance, a quality of reserve in Ed’s empathy, that maybe let him be so open: “Ed had many of the mannerisms of a psychoanalyst. Ed listened carefully and compassionately but of the mannerisms of a psychoanalyst. Ed did not especially cut an image of a stern, father figure. Rather, its opposite: one of encouraging others to grow and reach out in their own directions, letting things go where they go, without being directive. Jane Salk notes a nuance, a quality of reserve in Ed’s empathy, that maybe let him be so open: “Ed had many of the mannerisms of a psychoanalyst. Ed listened carefully and compassionately but of the mannerisms of a psychoanalyst. Ed did not especially cut an image of a stern, father figure. Rather, its opposite: one of encouraging others to grow and reach out in their own directions, letting things go where they go, without being directive. Jane Salk notes a nuance, a quality of reserve in Ed’s empathy, that maybe let him be so open: “Ed had many of the mannerisms of a psychoanalyst. Ed listened carefully and compassionately but...
[allowing] his acute sense of humor and irony to show through” (p. 53). And as teacher and colleague, Ed could be simultaneously supportive and direct. Peter Senge recounts this conversation:

I was complaining that the team with whom we were working seemed not very open to deeper inquiry around systemic sources of their problems. This prompted Ed to pose a classic “Ed Schein” question, “Peter, is your goal to help or to be smart?” The immediate effect of the question was as a reminder of how easily we can lose awareness of our own intentions in the flurry of actions and emotions in a challenging work setting.

Senge continues:

I never experienced Ed’s question as rhetorical. I did not experience that he was subtly implying that I should want to help. He was really just asking. The incident highlighted one of Ed’s greatest gifts, a capacity for genuine inquiry—for asking what he called “real questions” versus leading questions. Here, there is a through line from our earlier conversation about love… (p. 39).

Building on his early intellectual contributions elucidating socialization and career anchors, Ed next made deep impact in two other major substantive areas, culture and process consultation, likely his most famous areas of work.

Culture in its organizational sense was being studied surely before Ed started focusing here. Sociologist Phillip Selznick in his 1957 Leadership in Administration wrote insightfully about it, and by the early ‘80s, the notion of the “rites and rituals of corporate life” was being popularized in the business world by figures such as Terrence Deal, Allan Kennedy and very visibly by Tom Peters. These were influential efforts to be sure. What Ed brought was systematic attention and depth to the topic.

Dyer, as part of his chapter, summarizes Ed’s seminal notions on culture, layered strata of:

1. **Artifacts**—visible and feelable structures and processes. Overt behaviors.

2. **Espoused beliefs and values**—ideals, goals, ideologies, rationalizations, and assumptions.

3. **Basic underlying assumptions**—Unconscious taken-for-granted beliefs.

Ed understood how leadership and culture were inextricably linked, developmentally and functionally: how leaders shape culture and in turn are shaped by it.

Here, I want to highlight two other areas of Ed’s work on culture that struck me most reading Organization Culture and Leadership in 1985, areas I have not seen especially stressed in commentary on his work. The first is understanding how culture functions like organization character, understanding this in sociodynamic terms based on learnings from depth psychology. Ed writes:

> Culture solves problems for the group or organization and, even more important, it contains and reduces anxiety. The taken-for-granted assumptions that influence the ways in which members perceive, think, and feel about the world, stabilize that world, give meaning to it, and thereby reduce the anxiety that would result if we did not know how to categorize and respond to the environment. In this sense [of the psychodynamic meaning of the term] culture gives a group its character, and that character serves for the group the function that character and defense mechanisms serve for the individual (emphasis added, 1985, p. 312).

Ed’s understanding here opens the door to understanding characteristic patterns of culture, pointing the way for theorists and managers alike to look at the emotional dynamics that culture “gates” and that lie beneath the surface and its expressions in artifacts, espoused values and beliefs, and even basic assumptions. This leads to the second dimension of his treatment of organization culture that struck me most: how culture is shaped in the first instance through what he crystallized as socioemotional stages of group development. Building on his own and others’ learnings from T-groups, and on the work of earlier theorists, here too Ed shone a light: how these dynamics based on disturbing marker events in the developing life of the organization can create a kind of developmental arrest in its subsequent growth and functioning, permeating its operations, the ground from which its particular culture can arise.

Process consulting was a kind of twin theme to culture, certainly a companion, as it represented the intervention or practice side of the equation; moment-to-moment consultation in facilitating movement of human dynamics in group and organizational settings. First published in 1969, Process Consultation: Its Role in Organization Development was part of the early Addison Wesley series, which Ed co-edited along with Dick Beckhard. That series was a first in helping define the emerging field of OD. Beckhard himself was an important voice in the field’s formal development. He was also a colleague of Ed’s and highly regarded adjunct presence at MIT, notwithstanding his lack of advanced academic credentials, as noted by Dyer. This first edition of Process Consultation was aimed largely at consulting practitioners (and scholar-practitioners), and it remains “something of a canonical text for OD consultants” (p. 20). A subsequent Volume II built on the original and appeared in 1987, with the subtitle, Lessons for Managers and Consultants. Ed was extending his reach more and more beyond the academy, first to the practice of organization development, then further directly to the development of organizational leaders.

As an approach, process consultation served as a means to get to and “unpack” the socioemotional dimensions of group life, beyond intervening with content or more prescriptive analysis, say, into strategy or structure. It provided a port of entry directly addressing human process at work. In fact, definitionally for OD as a field, it gave shape and clarity to OD’s distinct value proposition, in comparison to other forms of management and technical consulting. The art of its practice did require a certain marginality to the system, similar to psychoanalytic neutrality. Again, this particularly suited Ed’s own style. But process consultation, just because of its focus,
was powerful when actively used right in the middle of a group’s “real work” or task endeavors. Thus, when behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, or assumptions emerged that got in the way of constructive thinking, conversation, or action—for example, when latent conflict surfaced that tied up decision making or problem solving—the consulting practitioner now had explicit means to work with the group on checking out and identifying what was occurring, then processing and owning for itself effective resolutions. This in fact was precisely the way master OD practitioner, Tony Petrella worked, by situating process consulting right in the middle of work redesign groups, thus making certain socio-technical contributions, as Eric Trist and others concurrently defined, come alive. A final version of Process Consultation appeared in 1999 as Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship. This launched Ed into two other areas in the arc of his career, topics related in theme and mood, Helping, in 2009, and the Humble series, beginning in 2013.

Helping, as Otto Scharmer well notes, is rooted in a primary commitment of Ed’s: “Always try to be helpful.” This of course does not mean going around trying to help everyone. It does mean, whenever you set out to be helpful, recognize the person you are helping owns the problem and the solution. It also means to recognize first the importance to just be of help, whatever that may be, acting from the question, “What would be most helpful to do just now?” Errant comments and advice outside the subject’s experience are almost never helpful, be it in teaching, consulting, or with friends, family, neighbors, or others in everyday life. This goes hand in hand with the principle of humility, as Scharmer notes, to “always deal with reality,” respecting circumstances as they are, not making more of them, nor less. Says Scharmer, “I have found these twin principles—always deal with reality and always try to be helpful—enormously grounding and helpful. They are like the two feet upon which Schein’s approach to learning stands” (p. 43).

These principles are dependent on another learning from Ed, the ability “to listen and attend closely to people and the phenomenon of study,” as Doughtery highlights (p. 76). She reflects how Ed could listen so intensely in a meeting or conversation that he did not need to take notes as people talked; he found a quiet place later to write up everything he heard. That ability to be completely absorbed in the situation at hand, to learn and to discover in their full implications, is the title of a whole chapter in the book, Gideon Kundla’s “Learning with Ed.” And in this same spirit, Sabina Schoefer’s essay, “The Art of the Seven,” identifies seven lifelong skills she found running throughout Ed’s books. It was through his writings that Schoefer first came to know Ed. I found Schoefer’s essay to be one that is of a shared piece of what others say, but one too that could especially stand on its own, outside this special volume. Too rich to do justice to by summarizing here, it is a must I think to carefully read.

All of these principles and learnings are effectively predicates to the notion of “humble leadership.” The proper presence of the leader is to be helpful and to serve, an “antidote to heroic leadership,” especially apt for our times (p. 35). This is a leadership based more on personal relationships than transactional roles, as Bailyn notes. “Personization” is the term Ed and Peter Schein use in the books’ series to describe the process of getting out of the way as leader, to see and be with the other person as person so they may flourish, at work and beyond. These, as Peter describes, are high trust relationships, ones that begin to reject personal distance at work and top-bottom thinking, rehumanizing the playing field as among colleagues and peers, absorbed in the work of co-creating.

Of Ed’s Helping and Humble Leadership, Van Maanen provides a beautiful summarizing up. “Looked at as a whole,” he says, “it represents the most personal, humanistic, and poetic of Ed’s writings. Each of the volumes, while self-contained and ostensibly covering different topics, converge around how one can build empathetic and trusting relationships.

This is work of a normative, value-centered sort. The interaction theory on which it is premised is held in the background and touched on only in passing. It is work that is meant to provoke action among its readers—to encourage conversations of a more dialogic, open-ended sort or to own up to not knowing what to do in a vexing situation (to “access your ignorance”). Ed’s own humility comes to the fore in the writing itself and is exhibited in the dozens of crisp and personalized case studies put forth. He shows that in many cases success is as likely as failure and thus sustaining a sense of the complexity of the unfolding situation is a prerequisite to authentic helping behavior (p. 21).

One More Key Theme

To touch briefly on one more theme running through this book: the relationship of theory and practice. Throughout his writing, teaching, and consulting, Ed operated on the basis that concept and hunches necessarily inform observation, but that immersing yourself in the situation at hand, letting the facts of a situation stand on their own and make a deep impression on you, comes first. This provides the only ground for real conceptualization. This is elaborated in different ways, and from their different perspectives, by the contributors to this volume. Ed’s emphasis on ethnography, on “clinical research,” on a life at the university and in consulting, OD as a field for scholar-practitioners, on doing the work and not being preoccupied with where you publish or the academic conferences where you are seen—all of these are described by various turns and reflect this line of thinking.

Van Maanen’s essay is something of a tour de force in this regard. Surely John’s own career was a living example of this. He uses the famous question from the intellectual historian Isaiah Berlin, “Hedgehog or Fox?”, to frame Ed’s orientation here. Ed did not seek out one grand idea like the hedgehog, but more like the fox, developed many ideas and let their thematic coherence emerge. Ed did not found a school of thought. “There is no established Schein(ian) paradigm” (p. 15).
He was comprehensive but not unceasingly systematic; his mode of reasoning, “abductive.” And when more inquiry was needed, Ed, together with John and others at OSG, pushed against the formalisms of ideas yet to find their time; what Kurt Lewin in a related way years earlier brilliantly argued against in social science, the risks of “premature formalization” (1940, p. 4).

With this said, Ed surely saw the value of theoretical thinking and high intellectual contribution. I once heard Ed describe the need for “a whole new level of theorizing” in the practice of OD to make the difference sought. Wolfgang Weber describes how Ed’s humanistic modes of discourse and engagement are consonant with one of the most conceptual minds of the modern era, social philosopher Jürgen Habermas and his idea of communicative action.

Yet Ed, at the end of the day, would surely seem to land on the side of learning from the situation before one, the spirit of inquiry, as Fatzer perfectly captures. We might say, from the perspective of the self-identity of a career anchor, Ed did not pursue a career in the academy (he was no careerist), but a career of learning and thought: Being out in the field to listen and learn, then standing out larger understanding. In this way, the work of theory too is suffused with the spirit of helping and humility, the themes in which Ed’s career culminate.

A Closing Personal Note

In all these ways, Ed himself really comes alive in the pages of this book. But the book does more than this; the reader comes alive. The book engages the reader in looking at themselves in light of its themes of Ed’s life and work. It did for me. I found myself reflecting on my own career throughout its pages and my own relationship to theory and practice. In closing, I’d like to share this for a moment, as a case in point of Ed’s reach and effect of this book.

I had the pleasure of meeting Ed when he came to lead the closing of our Pepperdine MSOD cohort as a guest professor in 1988. (He has generously come to that Pepperdine program for years to the delight and learning of the students.) Meeting for breakfast, I told him as part of my master’s work, I had been training, accepted as a social science type, in an unconventional school in psychiatry to apply it at an organizational systems level for theory and practice. I took as encouragement the way Ed listened as I described this, acknowledging the clinical modality and how I was crossing disciplines. On graduation, Walt Ross, the Pepperdine Program Director at the time and my thesis committee chair, encouraged me to really think about an academic career, applying perhaps to MIT’s program and see if I might study with Ed. My life and circumstances were such that I felt the need to concentrate on practice. Years later, again in connection with a Pepperdine program session, I had occasion to meet Ed once more. I told him that if I had had a regret in my career, it was that I hadn’t pursued study with him. I told him I had had a good career having become a partner in a major consulting firm, but how I might have missed the boat there. Ed, who I had only met that once before at breakfast, listened kindly and of course passed no judgement.

Now, as I read the chapters of this volume, their rich descriptions of life at OSG, I was kind of given a second chance to imagine what it might have been like to study with Ed, to feel it had I taken the other road. I especially left reading John Van Maanen’s chapter with a sense of appreciation and renewal. His life as an ethnographer of organizational life—which Ed had so affirmed in John’s own career—gave me pause to reframe my thinking about my chosen path of the many intervening years. John’s essay helped me see the value of my practice years as a deep dive, as it were, into the “organizational bush,” free of some of the strictures of the academy that Ed and John pushed back against. This let me test and experiment with some of my earlier ideas in action, and just observe what was happening in the many organizations I saw. And now I was able to return to the work of theorizing all on its own, despite whatever else was missed, enriched by and enriching my earlier work. Life turns in mysterious ways, ways surely that just unfold. All this was and is so central to Ed’s life and teaching, the value of life’s process in development and learning, the extent of his reach.

Thus, in the end, this book is more than about Ed’s learnings. It is about his learning, as gift among all he touched. And surely this is true: Whether those of you now reading the pages of this journal are principally a scholar, a practitioner or some variable hybrid, not one of us in the field is untouched by that very deepest legacy, that gift.

References


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